

The Answer You Get Depends on Who (and What) You Ask: Involving Stakeholders in Needs Assessments

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SUMMARY. This paper focuses on identifying and involving various distance-learning stakeholders in a needs assessment for library services. Topics covered include “Why who you ask matters” (rationale for including stakeholders), “Who you ask” (identifying stakeholders), “What you ask” (developing questions that ask what you need to know), and “How to involve those you have identified” (ways to increase stakeholder participation and, thereby, investment in the needs assessment process and library services related to distance learning programs).

KEYWORDS. Assessment, distance learners, stakeholders, distance education

INTRODUCTION

A waiter asks four diners, “What may I bring you for dessert?” The first diner enthusiastically orders the double chocolate fudge cheesecake; the sec-

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ond responds with, "No thank you, I'm a diabetic"; the third states, "Something light—the raspberry sorbet"; and the fourth says, "No dessert for me. I'm too full, just coffee, thanks." Each person has a unique answer based on particular wants and needs. If the waiter had asked, "Do you *want* dessert?" the answers may have been different. The answer the waiter receives depends on which question is asked and the person who responds. This whimsical, tongue-in-cheek example illustrates our initial point—the answer you get depends on who and what you ask. The relationship between question, respondent, and response illustrated in the restaurant scenario applies to needs assessment as well.

That relationship is examined here with a particular focus on identifying and involving various distance-learning stakeholders in a needs assessment for library services. Topics covered include "Who you ask?" (identifying stakeholders), "Why who you ask matters" (rationale for including stakeholders), "What you ask?" (developing questions that ask what you need to know), and "How to involve stakeholders you have identified" (ways to increase stakeholder participation and, thereby, investment in the needs assessment process and library services related to distance-learning programs).

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As emphasis on distance learning programs by many colleges and universities has increased, academic librarians face the challenge of meeting the needs of those involved in distance learning programs. Many distance learners may never enter the library itself or have a face-to-face encounter with a librarian. Responding to the challenge of providing library services in support of distance learning programs may involve continuing and/or adapting present library programs and services, establishing new delivery modes, and/or creating entirely new services. Effectively meeting the needs of the various participants in distance learning programs first requires identifying those needs. A valuable tool available for identifying these needs is the needs assessment.

Library services for distance learners (Cooper, Dempsey, Menon, & Millson-Martula, 1998; Gasaway, 1999; Kascus & Aguilar 1988; Niemi, Ehrhard, Neeley, 1998; O'Leary, 2000), as well as needs assessment related to library services (Clougherty, Forys, Lyles, Persson, Walters, & Washington-Hoagland, 1998; Ellern & Kimble, 1997; Lawton, 1989) have been the subject of research and publication. Authors discussing needs assessments have noted the importance of identifying and involving those groups who have come to be known as "stakeholders."

The concept of stakeholders originated in the areas of business (Wimer & Nowack, 1998) and management (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Cummings & Doh, 2000). This concept has also been applied to education (Burrows, 1999; Barrick & Cogliano, 1993), and more specifically to libraries ("Identify Your Library's Stakeholders," 1994).

"WHO YOU ASK"— HOW WE DEFINE AND IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS

A number of researchers have defined "stakeholder" or "stakeholders" in various ways. Freeman and Reed (1983) note that the word "stakeholder" was "coined in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute in 1963. . . ." In that context it referred to "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist" (p. 89). A chronology compiled by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) charts the development of responses to the question "Who is a stakeholder?" beginning with that 1963 memo and continuing through the following thirty-two years. They note that these definitions generally fall into one of two categories, broad or narrow. Those two categories in turn derive from two definitions proposed by Freeman and Reed (1983):

The wide sense of stakeholder. [italics added] Any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives or who is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives. (Public interest groups, protest groups, government agencies, trade associations, competitors, unions, as well as employees, customer segments, shareowners and others are stakeholders in this sense.)

The narrow sense of stakeholder. [italics added] Any identifiable group or individual on which the organization is dependent for its continued survival. (Employees, customer segments, certain suppliers, key government agencies, shareowners, certain financial institutions, as well as others are all stakeholders in the narrow sense of the term.) (p. 90)

It is worth noting that "wide" and "narrow," as just defined, form what may be considered the ends of a continuum, along which most definitions of stakeholder fall. Westbrook's (2001) definition of stakeholders as "those groups or individuals (whether or not they are library patrons), who have a strong interest in the library and its services" (p. 45), falls near the narrower end of the continuum. For the purpose of library needs assessment a more narrow definition of "stakeholder" is preferable. While a broad definition may be useful in determining a library's service area or potential patron base, a narrow definition fa-

cilitates identifying and targeting those individuals and groups to be involved in a needs assessment project. The more specifically stakeholder groups are defined, the more readily assessors will be able to target members of those groups, thus making the assessment process more manageable.

Accurately identifying stakeholders can be a difficult task. It is crucial to the needs assessment process to have the perspective of everyone involved. There are several different criteria proposed for identifying stakeholders. Mitchell, Agle, and Wood identify stakeholders in terms of what they call attributes: power, legitimacy and urgency. Burrows (1999) has created her own categories and groups to identify stakeholders, external vs. internal, active vs. passive, potential for cooperation and threat, and types of stakes and influence (pp. 6-7). Westbrook (2001) advocates the identification of stakeholders by "systems," as well as by traditional groupings, both demographic and organizational. Initial identification of stakeholders in a structured and highly bureaucratic organization, such as a university, is best accomplished by organizational groupings. By its very nature, the academic organization distinguishes which individuals belong to which groups, and provides pathways to access these groups, such as directories and e-mail. In the case of the academic library, such groups include students, faculty, university administrators, and library personnel.

The primary group of stakeholders that comes to mind when thinking of library needs and distance-learning is the students; however, the faculty who will be designing the courses, determining the content, and creating the assignments warrant consideration as well. Additional stakeholders may include administrators of distance-learning programs, and of computer services, as well as teaching faculty who have already integrated Internet support in their classes, and those in specific departments who in the future may want to develop and design distance-learning programs. Librarians and library staff in reference, interlibrary loan, government documents, reserves and library administrators, as well as from any other area supporting distance learning programs, should all be included as stakeholders.

In connection with identifying stakeholders, it may be useful to determine the particular stake each group holds. While Freeman (1984) considers stakes in a business context, Burrows (1999) applies that work to an academic setting and considers a number of possible stakes which various individuals or groups may hold. These include institutional, economic, social, scholarship, moral, and personal. Knowing the type of stake involved provides clues to the way a particular stakeholder or stakeholders may be approached. For example, to those who hold an institutional stake, the needs assessment and its results can be presented as a way to improve the institution's distance-learning programs and recruit additional students to those courses (also a plus to those with an economic stake). Im-

proved library programs will appeal to those with a scholarship stake. Thus discerning the stake is a valuable part of stakeholder identification.

***“WHY WHO YOU ASK MATTERS”–
RATIONALE FOR INCLUDING STAKEHOLDERS***

Given the thought, time and energy required to define then identify stakeholders in a particular setting, it is valid to ask why. Why make this effort? The answer, in a word, is success. Essential to a valuable and relevant needs assessment is “broad-based participation by stakeholders” (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Three more detailed reasons for involving stakeholders in needs assessment will be given here.

One reason for involving stakeholders right from the beginning of a needs assessment project is the pool of resources they offer for planning and conducting the needs assessment. For example, the inclusion of teaching faculty and those directly responsible for the university’s distance learning program provides a more balanced and complete foundation for the project. Including past or present distance learners will add valuable insights.

Increased support of and participation in the needs assessment itself constitutes a second reason for involving stakeholders. Whether by taking part in focus groups, encouraging response to questionnaires or providing funding, widespread support of the people who will be affected by the outcome has significant impact. Including the full spectrum of identified stakeholders leads to more accurate, useful results.

The third reason for involving stakeholders relates to post-assessment activities. Involvement of stakeholders leads to greater commitment, again of time, skills and other resources, to implementing any changes or new services developed as a result of the assessment findings.

It should be noted here that involving stakeholders places what may be considered a responsibility on the assessment group. That is, the assessors will be accountable for attending to the data and other information given by stakeholders who have been asked to be involved. Stakeholders by virtue of that involvement will have expectations of the assessment and its results. Nevertheless, the variety of perspectives, skills and resources members of stakeholder groups have to offer warrants their inclusion in the needs assessment process from the initial stage through implementation of any resulting changes.

***“WHAT YOU ASK”–
DEVELOPING QUESTIONS THAT ASK WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW***

Having determined who will be involved in the needs assessment, the next step is to develop the what—that is, to frame the questions that will be asked.

Although treatment of specific data collection methods (interview, focus group, questionnaire, etc.) is outside the scope of this discussion, all of them incorporate questions to some degree. Before constructing questions, consider the type of data or information to be gathered. Questions asking "How much?" "How many?" and "How often?" yield numeric data. Items asking if the stakeholder agrees/disagrees or likes/dislikes probe opinions. Inquiring about specific resources or titles provides narrative information.

Each question used as a part of any needs assessment tool should be ". . . a very special construct with a clearly focused purpose" (Czaja & Blair, 1996, p. 63). General rules for creating questions for any needs assessment tool are: each question should be concise, unequivocal, contain a single thought, avoid double negatives, and for a survey, be close-ended (Hayes, 1997; Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter, & Ferguson, 1996). Converse and Presser (1986) recommend using simple language, and short questions, avoiding implicit negatives, overlong lists and dangling alternatives (pp. 10-15). Fink (1995) offers these guidelines for using conventional language in questions: use complete sentences, but avoid the use of abbreviations, slang and colloquial expressions, jargon and technical expressions, dual issue questions and negative questions (pp. 22-29).

Questions should also be as bias-free as possible and ". . . sound natural if administered by an interviewer or . . . read smoothly if self-administered. . . ." (Czaja & Blair, p. 62), and as Westbrook (2001) states, ". . . not be 'loaded' to elicit a particular reaction or response" (p. 81). Westbrook (2001) also emphasizes that questions should be reliable and valid. She defines reliable questions as those worded in such a way so the answers are consistent, providing quantifiable data; examples are age, address, and education level. Valid questions provide more subjective information, such as preferences, and feelings.

Different sets of questions will be more appropriate for different stakeholder groups. Querying frequency of library use among administrators would not yield profitable data for assessing needs of students in distance learning programs. However, the attitudes of administrators toward distance learning programs, electronic library resources, and the Internet in general might prove very insightful. Faculty also would require a unique set of questions. The nature and number of assignments in traditionally based courses, compared to both Internet supported courses and Internet based courses would be useful. Questions for students might inquire as to their area of residence, study habits, previous use and experience in the academic library, comfort in using the Internet, and familiarity with electronic library resources, such as databases, electronic journals and electronic books. Each stakeholder group can provide a valuable parcel of information that will complete the picture of the needs assessment.

Obviously the purpose of constructing the questions is to generate usable responses and gather the answers for meaningful analysis. While stakeholder involvement throughout the needs assessment process has been a major point of this discussion, nowhere is such involvement more crucial than in their response to whatever assessment methods and processes are used.

***“HOW TO INVOLVE THOSE YOU HAVE IDENTIFIED”–
WAYS TO INCREASE STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION***

The most difficult feature of the needs assessment process is involving stakeholders. It is crucial to the success of a needs assessment process. Yet, it is often the one thing that is overlooked or ignored. There are four important points related to involving stakeholders: acknowledging their importance, communicating with them, treating them with consistency and honesty, and identifying to them the advantages of participation.

Firstly, the importance of the stakeholders has to be acknowledged. The needs assessment process is a hollow, empty vehicle if there are no stakeholders involved. It is only in the cooperation and participation of stakeholders that the needs assessment will have any meaningful results. Let the stakeholders know how important their opinions and needs are to the entire process. Involving representative stakeholders, even in the planning phase, acknowledges their importance to the entire process.

The second step is communicating with stakeholders. Communication with participants may be initiated by a pre-assessment promotion. Promotion may take the form of publicizing the upcoming assessment in terms of the new distance learning program being offered, and possible new library services which may attract the attention of potential student and faculty groups. This promotion can also serve to inform potential participants by supplying details about who is sponsoring/conducting the assessment, what the assessment process will be, and how the data collected will be used. An article in a local or student newspaper may be a good starting point. Additionally a library display, flyers, posters or paper bookmarks may attract the attention of potential stakeholders. E-mail and voice mail announcements to distribution lists associated with the library or campus may also be helpful. Sending stakeholders written confirmation of their agreement to participate, reminders of interview times, or of the date survey forms will be available may increase involvement.

The third step is to be consistent and honest with stakeholders. It seems this should go without saying, but too often assessors overlook being consistent in what they say and do. If a deadline is stated, stick with it; if copies of the findings of the needs assessment are promised to faculty, deliver them. The opposite is also true: refrain from making promises that cannot be kept. Do not imply that a

coveted and expensive database will be subscribed to, or that library hours will be extended simply because certain individuals have endorsed or participated in the assessment. Each group of stakeholders has their own agenda and it is unethical to use that agenda to manipulate their participation.

Fourthly, demonstrate to stakeholders the advantages of participation. The ultimate goal of the needs assessment is the enhancement of library resources and services available to students in a distance-learning program. Involvement by stakeholders provides them with a chance to help shape and customize library services. Also, this is an opportunity for stakeholders to make their voice heard through giving honest input, which will remain confidential. In addition, stakeholders may be provided with an opportunity to earn a bonus or reward as an incentive.

Other general methods for increasing participation by stakeholders include repeated contacts with participants, providing information regarding the use of the results, identifying the sponsor, and the use of rewards or monetary incentives (Hayes, 1997). The use of rewards or monetary incentives is expensive and generally out of reach for many libraries, especially academic libraries. As noted previously, different stakeholder groups have different stakes, and therefore will be motivated by different incentives. For example, students might respond to a willing professor allowing a few "extra points" for participation. Perhaps the managers of the university bookstore could be persuaded to donate low cost items such as pens, pencils, or stickers for distribution as a thank you (incentive) for participation. Additionally, libraries fortunate enough to have an active library volunteer group might ask the volunteers to make flyers, or bookmarks, or bake cookies for promotion or as incentives for participation in the needs assessment process.

In conclusion, it is essential to remember the importance of defining, identifying and involving stakeholders in any needs assessment for library services, particularly in a distance-learning environment. Though such involvement may seem like trying to please all the diners in the introductory scenario, with careful consideration all may leave satisfied and, perhaps, even with a smile.

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